Oral History- Interview

To help with this project, I enlisted the help of my mother who recruited her father and his sister to locate and explain the various artifacts, documents, and photographs that help to tell the story of a great love that has been scarred by war. My mother, Kimm D’lee Dillard Hunt is the daughter of Jerry Tillman Dillard II. She has always been enthralled with her family’s history and I knew she would be the perfect source for this project. Through her assistance, we located many artifacts and documents that help tell my own story. To narrow it down, we focused on her father’s family, specifically his parents and the ways WWII molded our genealogy. The information they provided reads as follows:

Oral History- Report

Flossie Martha Ann Elizabeth Stewart was born January 12th, 1925 to parents Charles Jerome and Mazie Theodosha Patterson Stewart. Flossie was the oldest of their twelve children though two did not survive infancy. She was born in Stigler, Oklahoma and raised Oklahoma City where she graduated from Capitol Hill High School. In 1941, her family then decided to move to California. On the way, their car broke down in Plainview, Texas. While waiting for repairs, two of Flossie’s siblings came down with typhoid fever from eating a pear. While they waited for the children to be well again, the older children, including Flossie, worked on a cotton farm in town. It was at this farm while hoeing cotton that Flossie would meet her fate.

Flossie’s older brother Orville met Wren and Jerry Dillard when they were working for a beverage delivery company. They became friends and eventually Orville told Jerry about his sister, Flossie. Shortly after, Jerry visited the cotton farm and that’s when fate stepped in. The two dated and were eventually married on July 31, 1942.

After WWII broke out, Jerry went to Lubbock Texas to enlist in the army on June 10, 1943. He was selected for the 605th Field Artillery Battalion as part of the 10th Mountain Division which was activated that year. The 10th Mountain Division is a light infantry division of the United States Army based at Fort Drum, New York, It is a subordinate unit of the XVIII Airborne Corps and the only division-sized element of the US Army to specialize in fighting under harsh terrain and weather conditions. After training, Jerry returned home for a few months before leaving for Europe. While deployed, Jerry sent gifts and wrote letters to his wife and unborn child.

From April 27 to May 2, the 10th Mountain Division pursued German forces into northern Italy's rugged alpine region, home to the 50-mile-long Lake Garda. The enemy began blowing up the tunnels through the mountains on the lake's northern end. Thus the division's commanders sent soldiers across the lake in amphibious six-wheeled trucks, known by their military designation DUKW and known to GIs as ducks.

On the night of April 30, 1945, three DUKWs, carrying members of the division's 605th Field Artillery, left the lake's east side. One of the vehicles, packed with 25 soldiers and a 75 mm cannon, stalled during the journey and soon began taking on water. The soldiers desperately tossed their equipment and ammunition overboard in an attempt to keep the vessel from sinking but the DUKW went down anyway, plunging the men into the frigid waters of the glacier-fed lake. Soon all had drowned but Cpl. Thomas Hough, a former lifeguard from Ohio. Hough was rescued by two other soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division who were on the shore when they heard the cries for help and commandeered a fisherman's boat.

Back in Plainview, Flossie was working in the hospital’s lab when she received a telegram that would forever change the fate of her and her unborn child. The telegram explained that PFC. Jerry T. Dillard was Missing in Action and presumed dead. This telegram was dated May 8, 1945, also known as V-E Day.

In September, Flossie went into labor. It was said she protested and refused to give birth until her husband came home as she would not accept the news of his death until she had proof. She was then told that she “owed it to Jerry to have a happy and healthy baby”. Four months and fourteen days after the war in Europe had ended, Jerry Tillman Dillard II was born. Flossie and her newborn son moved into a small house on the property of Jerry’s parents. She went to nursing school and after graduation worked at Plainview Hospital.

Jerrys’ older brother Wren Jackson Dillard was a sergeant in the army where he served as an airplane mechanic until he was honorably discharged in 1945. Wren received 6 bronze medals during his time in the army. Once he returned, he worked as an auto mechanic. After the death of his brother, Wren took on the role of supporting Flossie and her young son. On May 4, 1947, Wren and Flossie wed and together they added four more children to their family.

In 1963, Flossie’s oldest son, Jerry T. Dillard II attempted to enlist at the age of 18. However, he was refused due to the MIA/KIA status of his father and him being his sole child. Instead, he went to college and received his court reporting certificate. He later married Kitty Francis Lloyd on November 9, 1968. In 1970 and 1974 they welcomed a daughter and son, respectively.

Growing up, my family would spend any holiday we could gathered with others at the home of Flossie and Wren. The love between the two was ever present and it was obvious that they cherished each other, even from behind my young eyes. I watched him dote on her and the love in his eyes was so pure.

Flossie Martha Ann Elizabeth Stewart Dillard passed away on March 8, 2005, just over a year after Wren’s passing on January 4, 2004. Flossie had nine grandchildren at the time of her death. Since then, the number of her great-grandchildren has grown from from nine to seventeen. In 2010, her first, and so far only, great-great grandchild was born, something everyone would agree she would have loved to have been able to see.

Jerry T. Dillard’s name is engraved on the Wall of the Missing at the Florence American Cemetery in Italy, a memorial encompassing 70 acres that was dedicated in 1960. If you ask my mother, her dream in life is to visit this memorial and see his name in person. I share that dream. This following is from the American Battle Monuments Commission:

*“The Florence American Cemetery and Memorial site in Italy covers 70 acres. The wooded hills that frame its western perimeter rise several hundred feet. Between the two entrance buildings, a bridge leads to the burial area where the headstones of 4,402 of our military dead are arrayed in symmetrical curved rows upon the hillside. They represent 39 percent of the U.S. Fifth Army burials originally made between Rome and the Alps. Most died in the fighting that occurred after the capture of Rome in June 1944. Included among them are casualties of the heavy fighting in the Apennines Mountains shortly before the war's end. On May 2, 1945 the enemy troops in northern Italy surrendered. Above the graves, on the topmost of three broad terraces, stands the memorial marked by a tall pylon surmounted by a large sculptured figure. The memorial has two open atria, or courts, joined by the Tablets of the Missing upon which are inscribed 1,409 names. Rosettes mark the names of those since recovered and identified. The atrium at the south end of the Tablets of the Missing serves as a forecourt to the chapel, which is decorated with marble and mosaic. The north atrium contains the marble operations maps recording the achievements of the American armed forces in this region.”*

In 2013, we were given incredible news. An Italian dive team had discovered a Military DUKW while searching the depths of Lake Garda. Although it won’t be an easy feat, this news meant that perhaps Jerry would no longer be listed as MIA and could one day return home, just as Flossie always knew he would and our family just might have peace. Until then, PFC. Jerry T. Dillard rests with the others who bravely gave their lives for our country on that fateful April evening.

Where Are We Now?

**Typhoid Fever**- is less prevalent today, especially in the United States and other developed countries. In the United States about 400 cases occur each year, and 70% of these are acquired while traveling internationally. Typhoid fever is still common in the developing world, where it affects about 12.5 million persons each year.

**Milk Delivery**- today in the United States, milk delivery trucks take milk to the stores rather than to the homes of people. Old milk trucks are often restored as a hobby.

**Hoeing Cotton**- Cotton no longer needs to be harvested by hand since the incredible advancements in technology. Annual business revenue stimulated by cotton in the U.S. economy exceeds $120 billion, making cotton America’s number one value-added crop.

**10th Mountain Division**- On 30 November 1945, the 10th Mountain Division was disbanded. The Division was officially the 10th was the first division of any kind formed by the Army since 1975 and the first based in the Northeast US since World War II. The 10th Mountain Division (LI) was designed to meet a wide range of worldwide infantry-intensive contingency missions. Equipment design was oriented toward reduced size and weight for reasons of both strategic and tactical mobility. After adding humanitarian, training and operational deployments together, the 10th Mountain Division (LI) had earned the distinction of being the most deployed Army division during the 1990s

**DUKW Boats**- After their success in WWII, the DUKWs were deactivated, only to be re-activated and sent to Korea as soon as the war there began. In 1956, the DUKW evolved into a more developed version that was bigger and better. It was named the DRAKE. However, due to their high cost of production, they were never authorized for production. The DUKWs continued serving the United States Army until the mid-1960s.

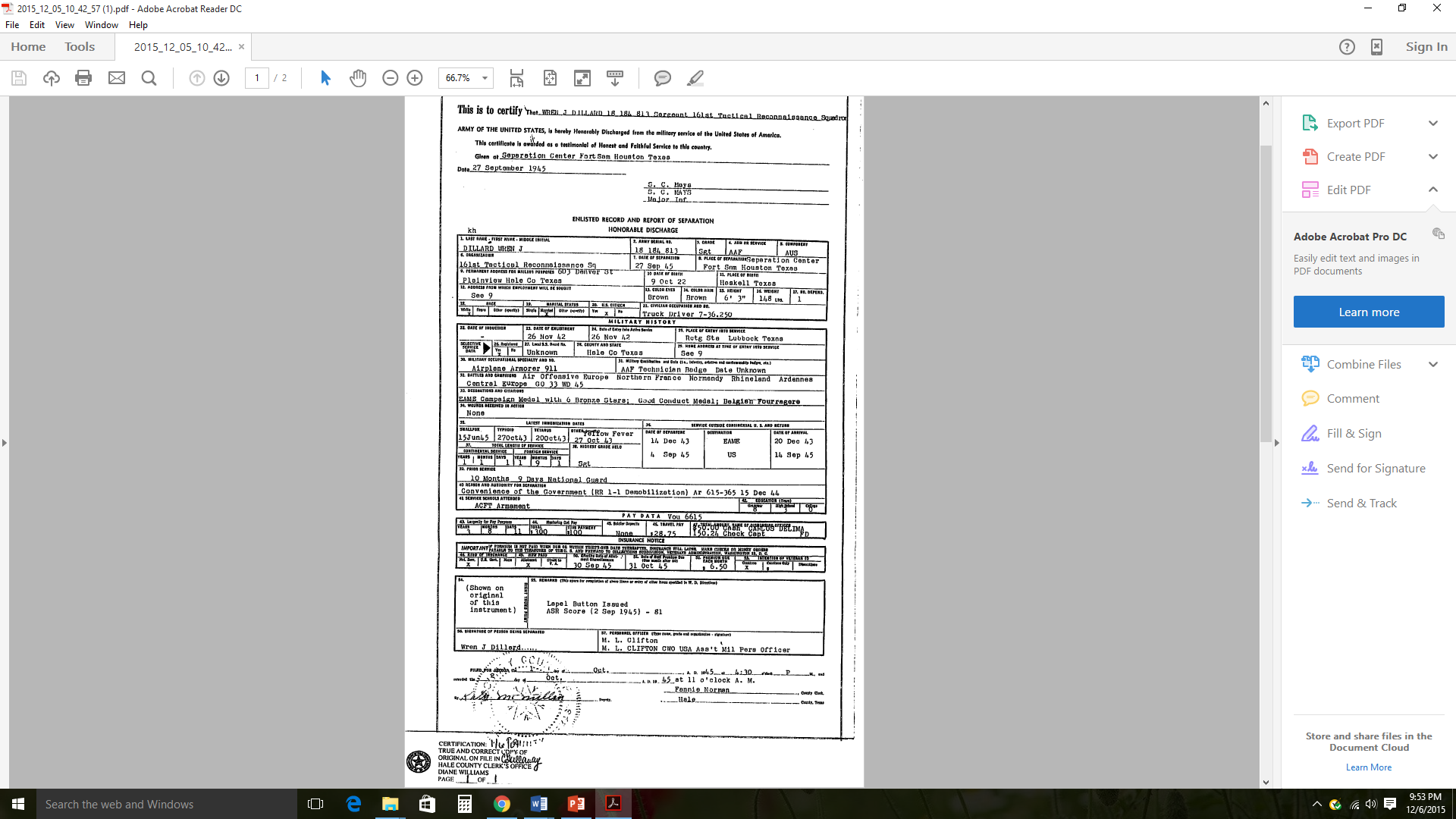
**Telegrams**- during the War, the army used a variety of methods to tell a soldiers family of his death. Western Union was a company that sent out telegrams to the families of the deceased. The army also hired taxi companies and sent them to the homes of these families. Now, the army has a unit of members known as Casualty Notification Officers, who go with a chaplain to the homes, in dress uniform, to inform families in person. Also, telegrams are not in use anymore since the fax machines, email, text message, etc. have taken over.

**Postage Stamps**- the envelope from the letter written by Wren to his parents after the death of his brother has a stamp on it indicating a cost of six cents. Today, the cost of stamps in the US is more than eight times that, sitting at forty-nine cents.

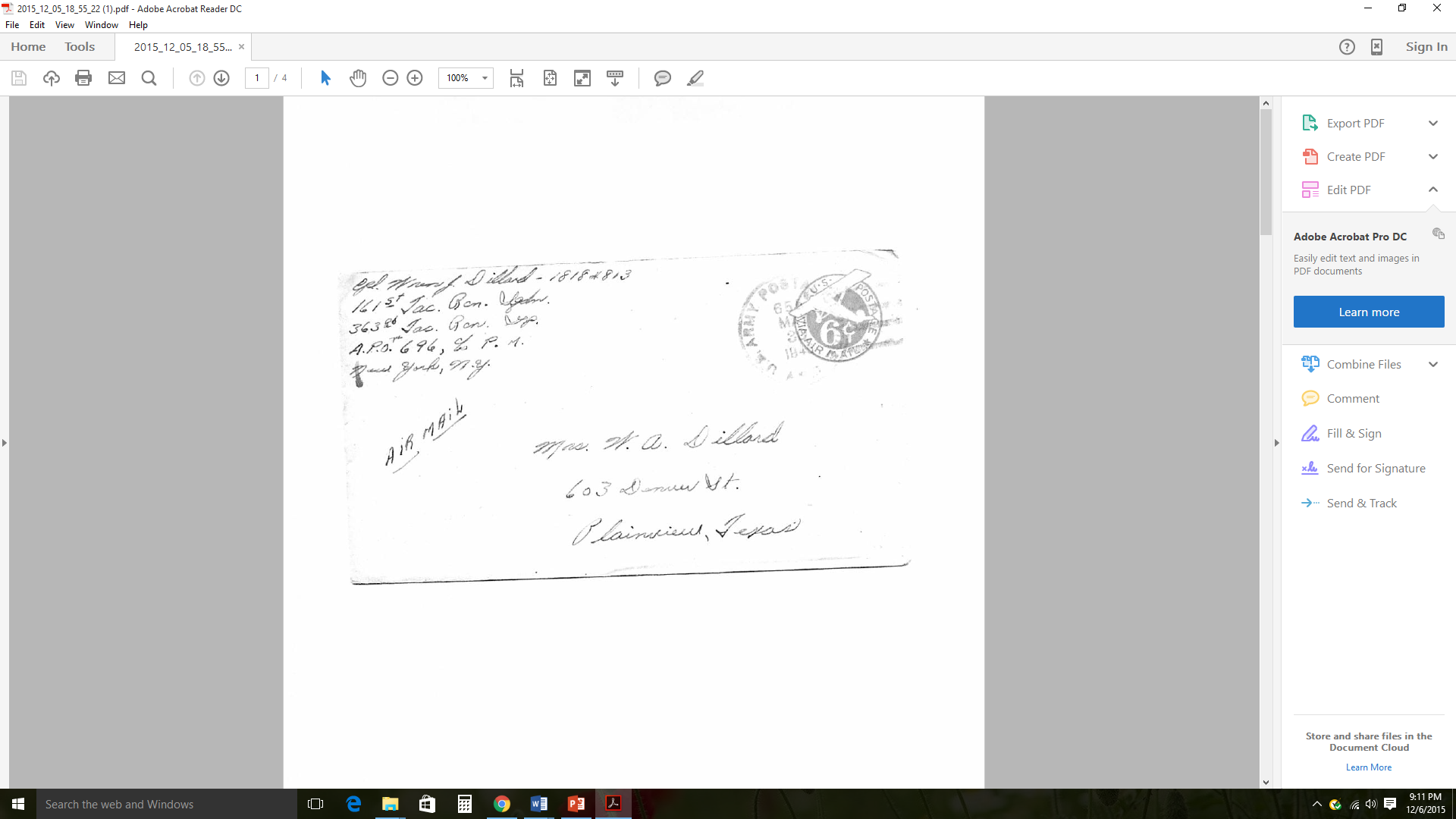
Additional Facts

* Kimm D’lee Dillard and her grandmother, Flossie, share the same birthday. Kimm was the first of Flossie’s nine grandchildren and the only granddaughter of Jerry Tillman Dillard I.
* After Wren returned from duty, he had to have surgery. During his recovery, he was forced to stay in bed. Flossie, the nurse that she was, went to see him and told him that if he didn’t get up and take her to the movies, she wouldn’t marry him…there even hadn’t been a proposal from him yet. In fact, Flossie recently declined the marriage proposal of another man.
* The garage that Wren worked at after returning to Plainview was about a block away from where Flossie worked on the Cotton farm.
* Senator Bob Dole wrote a letter requesting the search for the missing men.
* Flossie, who never wanted to believe Jerry was KIA, once told my mom, “Wren would feel pretty weird if Jerry walked through the door”.
* It is thought that Jerry would often “lose” his gear and have to have it replaced.
* Three of the Stewart girls all married Dillard men. Flossie married Jerry T. Dillard and then his brother Wren after he died. Her sister Charlene married their uncle Eugene Dillard, and Mildred married Jack Dillard.
* Before the war, Jerry I also worked for Coca-Cola, who required their employees to remove their logo from their clothing when they left…Jerry did not.
* Jerry was home on furlough around Christmas of 1944 when Flossie became pregnant with their son.
* After Jerry died, his parents built a small house in their backyard for Flossie and her newborn.
* It is said that Flossie pulled her son Jerry II off the bus when he tried to go enlist in the Army.

**Wren Jackson Dillard’s Discharge**



Envelope containing the letter written by Wren to his parents after receiving word of his brother’s death



10th Mountain Division near Lake Garda, April 1945

Children of Flossie Martha Ann Elizabeth Stewart Dillard  
(Jerry, Janice, Jack, Skip, Ken)

  
  
“Flossie’s Flock” (note: 2 grandchildren, many great-grandchildren, and the sole great-great granchild are not pictured)

